



Submitted by Bruce Sidwell, President of Friends of Sligo Creek-- December 7, 2009

The Environmental Value of the Sligo Creek Golf Course

In this short presentation, I would like to cover the main points of why what happens to the Sligo Creek Golf Course site is of interest to the Friends of Sligo Creek.

Beginning with the big picture-- As you all are aware, as the Eastern Seaboard has become heavily developed, our streams and seashore have become seriously degraded. For example, the water quality and economic benefits of the Potomac River and Chesapeake Bay have been devastated. Likewise, populations of most wildlife and native plants have been greatly depleted.

What's this got to do with the golf course?

Scientists have learned that healthy stream valleys in urban areas play important roles in protecting water resources, native plants, and wildlife.

- 1) the watershed of Sligo Creek is connected to the Potomac by way of the Anacostia. So protecting Sligo and Northwest Branch from pesticides, excess nutrients, trash, and silt tends to protect the Potomac and even the Bay.
- 2) stream valleys like Sligo that connect with green sites upstream and downstream provide better wildlife habitat than larger chunks of forest that do not connect to other natural areas. This is because stream valleys are corridors for birds, butterflies, and other native animals; and at a slower pace, even for plants. Sligo Park is part of a continuous animal and plant "highway" that stretches from Wheaton Regional Park all the way to the Potomac.
- 3) the 65 acre golf course site is an appreciable portion of the biological system of Sligo Creek Park. By and large it currently is not a drawback to the local environment. It tends to buffer, rather than cause, excessive light, air, noise, or water pollution. It has a small stream, a pond, many large healthy trees, and areas of understory shrubs. Since it has the basic elements for wildlife habitat (shelter, sources of food, water, and places for birds and other wildlife to raise young) it integrates fairly well with surrounding, more natural parkland.

--The trees are especially important components of the site since research has shown that wooded areas are more capable of soaking up excess rain than turf grass. The big trees in the course also provide shelter and nesting possibilities for wildlife such as gray and flying squirrels, bats, and numerous species of birds, including screech and barred owls, nuthatches, woodpeckers, crows, and several species of hawks. Trees such as Tulip Poplar also offer food for numerous species of butterflies such as swallowtails. In conversations I've had with local tree experts, they point out that the course is a great place for the trees that are there. They are well-spaced and uncrowded, they don't have to deal with much pavement, and water is sufficient. Many of the trees date back more than seventy years. An advisor to the MC Revenue Authority commented that the white pines "may be nearing the end of their normal life span". However his opinion conflicts with those of local experts. Despite the sometimes alarming tendency of large pines to drop occasional branches, they are healthy. Concerning the white pines, the Takoma Park arborist noted that "If the white pines are healthy they should be left alone. If they make it past 20 that means they are happy with the soils and hydrology and are likely to last a long time." Lastly, the golf course forest also provides a useful buffer to noise, stormwater run-off, and heat generated by the nearby Beltway.

-- The shrubs, grass, and other plants growing in the "rough" areas of the golf course site are also

valuable as wildlife habitat and to absorb excess rainwater and fertilizer. Even the manicured fairways and putting greens provide environmental benefits since they protect the soil from erosion and slow down stormwater.

4) In recognition of the benefits of having a healthy stream and forest park, since the 1980s, County agencies have spent millions of dollars for restoration of the creek, stormwater management ponds, planting of trees, and removal of non-native invasive plants in the Montgomery County portion of Sligo Creek Park. In addition, Park and Department of Environmental Protection staff put in thousands of hours in their efforts to protect Sligo and other urban streams. Lastly, in just the last few years many hundreds of volunteers have devoted thousands of hours to looking after the natural health of the park.

5) Because of the natural values mentioned above, Friends of Sligo Creek believes that discussions of modifying the site need to carefully balance the value of the modification against the damage it may cause the environment. For example, adding a driving range to the site would detract from the natural benefits of the area in a number of ways. Most importantly:

- a) because it would be a large area of hitting stations and closely-mowed grass it would have essentially no appeal to wildlife;

- b) having no trees or shrubs would severely limit the site's ability to retain stormwater, cool the area, reduce CO₂, or buffer traffic noises;

- c) making room for the driving range will mean that numerous mature trees will be cut down or their roots damaged by construction traffic;

- d) increased traffic to the course will mean more air pollution, harassment of wildlife, and ultimately, more pavement for parking and for turning lanes, etc.

6) In addition to the above clear drawbacks, there are a number of others that are plausible problems. These include:

- noise from the range will drive away birds and other wildlife;

- if lights are used they will likely harass and confuse birds, bats, and other wildlife. Even plantlife can be affected by lights since that's how many regulate their growth cycles; likewise, nets and fences can impede and drive away wildlife;

- over time, the soil of the driving range will likely become impacted by use of ball-gathering equipment and possibly by the millions of hits by the balls-- this will degrade the ability of the turf to retain rainwater;

- increased use of the site will invariably mean more trash will be generated, contaminating the site and nearby park;

- and -- the energy costs of a driving range, especially if it includes lights and heated stations, will be high.

In sum, the Friends of Sligo Creek believe that the communities along Sligo Creek and Montgomery County agencies strongly recognize the creek and surrounding park for its environmental, social, aesthetic, and economic value. Modifying the site in ways that would degrade the natural benefits of the golf course site such as by increasing stormwater runoff, destroying trees and wildlife habitat, and otherwise decreasing biodiversity would, in effect, negate some of the work and money invested in the Creek. Therefore, any plan to modify the site must carefully consider the natural benefits of the area and the priorities of the community.